

“But I Say to You: DIVORCE”

Mt. 5:31-32, Mt. 19:3-9, 1 Cor. 7:10-15

Wednesday 7/10/19 – Jeff Lyle

Divorce and remarriage are issues that the Church has offered various views upon over the centuries. While nearly half of all first-time marriages end in a divorce, it is not enough to simply acknowledge that there is a painful problem. One day, some religious leaders wanted to debate with Jesus over this issue. His response to their questions about divorce, alongside of what the Apostle Paul wrote in one of his letters, help us to understand much of the heart of God on the matter. There are two ditches that Christians must avoid when considering the issue of divorce and remarriage: indulgent coddling and loveless condemnation. We need to know what God thinks and exalt that as our own adopted view.

I. What God Has Declared Concerning Marriage & Divorce

Matthew 19:3-9 “And Pharisees came up to Him and tested Him by asking, “Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?” 4 He answered, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, 5 and said, Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? 6 So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” 7 They said to Him, “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?” 8 He said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. 9 And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.”

In an early attempt to place Jesus in a theological/traditional trap, the Pharisees brought up the issue of divorce to Him. They wanted to know what He thought about the matter. In Jesus’ day, women were never permitted to divorce their husbands. According to much of the commonly held views of the day, men could basically divorce their wives for anything. The scales were unjustly set in favor of men. While God’s Word did not allow for arbitrarily divorcing one’s wife, the tradition from many of the Jewish leaders allowed for exactly that. They wanted to see where Jesus’ own position was on the matter.

A. The exclusivity of marriage (Mt. 19:4) - “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female?”

Immediately, Jesus references the written Word. In a bit of a firm nudge, Jesus asks these religious leaders whether or not they had read their bibles. Jesus goes on to establish that God’s design for marriage has always been

for one man and one woman to enter into an unbreakable covenant with one another. This is God's only design for marriage. There is not a Plan B which he offers concerning an approved mindset about marriage.

B. The permanency of marriage (Mt. 19:5-6) - "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh"? 6 So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."

When a man and woman enter into a marriage covenant, they are now each other's priority, surpassing even that of loyalty to their parents and their other blood relatives. The sexual union between a husband and wife moves them out of the status of individual independence, and God declares that they have become one flesh. He has joined their lives together, uniting them in a lifelong state of holy matrimony. This is how God views a marriage vow.

The fact that there is not an abundance of instruction and detail written in Scripture about marriage only serves to prove that God intends it to be very simple. He desires for all of us to seek His face when seeking a spouse. When we commit our lives to one another in marriage, there is no confusion about whether or not we should stay together. Because of the reality of divorce, God does communicate a few times on the subject so that we may clearly know His eternal views. See below for some examples.

C. The severity of divorce

1. God hates divorce (Malachi 2:14-16) - "...the Lord was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. 15 Did He not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring. So, guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth. 16 "For the man who does not love his wife but divorces her, says the Lord, the God of Israel, covers his garment with violence, says the Lord of hosts. So, guard yourselves in your spirit, and do not be faithless."

God speaks to the men and confronts us in the context of potentially departing from our wives. He reminds us that He himself was a witness to our vows. He calls us to consider both our faith in Him and our faithfulness to Him and our wives. He also reminds us that it was not merely a decision to marry her, but a covenant to remain married

to her. Perhaps surprisingly, God says in the verses above that the Holy Spirit was present and active in the physical and spiritual activity of making us one with our spouse. Then, we are told to intentionally guard our own heart/spirit and not to relinquish our faith toward God nor our spouse. The final words above are sobering. A loveless husband who abandons his wife is told to expect much trouble afterwards. I find it significant that God repeatedly connects our views on our marriage with our faith, our integrity and whatever is going on in our spirit. Clearly, the Lord hates divorce (Malachi 2:16).

2. Divorce usually results in the sin of adultery (Mt. 5:31-32, 19:8-9)

Mt. 5:31-32 - “It was also said, Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ 32 But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”

Almost always, divorce results in adultery. Modern Christians may be shocked at Jesus’ words here. While I will deal with the exclusionary phrase “Except on the grounds of sexual immorality” a little later, Jesus’ words are still true and serve to warn all of us in a day of free and easy divorce in our culture. He states that everyone who divorces their spouse initiates a series of events whose end result is adultery. Adultery was the sin forbidden in the seventh of the ten commandments. Under Jewish Law, adultery was punishable by death. To initiate a divorce with one’s spouse, except in the case of sexual infidelity, is to begin a pathway that leads to adultery. Also, in view of remarriage, to marry someone who has been divorced almost always results in adultery. At the very least, Jesus arrests the attention of His original audience when He spoke these words. It should arrest our attention also.

Mt. 19:8-9 - “Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. 9 And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.”

Jesus attaches the potential decision to divorce with something being wrong in the heart. Moses never endorsed nor commanded divorce, but in the Mosaic Law, divorce is allowed for. Marriage in ancient Semitic times was more of a legal contract than a love story. Dowries were paid to fathers for their daughters to be given in marriage. A clear purpose to render any divorce proceeding more difficult is seen in the steps offered in Deuteronomy 24. Moses’ aim was to regulate and slow down the potential process of a man leaving

his wife. The “certificate of divorce” was clearly intended to ensure that a man had ample opportunity to think long and hard about what he was doing. The purpose of the process in Deuteronomy 24 seems to be meant to favor the wife, and to protect her against an arbitrary eviction from her marriage, her home and her children. Jesus was not vague: except for sexual immorality, divorce was not allowed.

II. What God Has Conceded Concerning Marriage and Divorce

A. Concession # 1 - Sexual immorality on the part of the husband or wife (Mt. 5, Mt. 19) - “...except for sexual immorality...”

Please see the notes above for a further understanding of this. We are not given specifics of what constitutes sexual immorality. It might serve us well here to add that the Greek word translated “sexual immorality” is *porneia*, from which we get our English word *pornography*. It is used in the bible generally to refer to any sexual sin (1 Cor. 6:13, 18; 7:2; 2 Cor. 12:21; Gal. 5:19; Eph. 5:3; Col. 3:5; 1 Thess. 4:3; Rev. 9:21). One need not engage in actual sexual penetration with another person to be guilty of sexual immorality. Unrepentant pornography, other forms of non-penetrative sexual activity and indulgent fantasies that violate the sexual ethic of a husband and wife may also be grounds for divorce.

B. Concession # 2 - Abandonment by an unsaved spouse

1 Cor. 7:10-15 - “To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband 11 (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife. 12 To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. 13 If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. 14 For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. 15 But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace.

While this passage of Scripture is not found in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, it is still a biblically authoritative passage of Scripture which speaks to the subject of divorce. Paul is inspired by the Holy Spirit to reveal one other concession for divorce. When a Christian is married to an unbeliever, that Christian is called to remain married to that person. We are not permitted

by God to divorce our spouse due to our differences in belief concerning Christ. While we are forbidden as Christians from marrying non-Christians (2 Corinthians 6:14), many people are converted after they have been married. They are called to abide in that marriage, even though it originally occurred outside of the context of them being saved. If a non-believing spouse abandons a Christian, the Christian is to let them leave without a fight. When Paul writes that the believing Christian is no longer “enslaved”, he is indicating that they are no longer bound to that marriage. They have been left by the unbelieving spouse, and they are now liberated to remarry a Christian. So, a study of Scripture allows for only 2 causes of biblically permissible divorce: sexual immorality and abandonment by an unbelieving spouse. In these two instances the Christian is free to remarry. It is wise to note that in neither case are we commanded to divorce our spouse. We are permitted to do so if we choose. However, one must wrestle through the tension of knowing that, as Jesus-followers, we are also called to grace, mercy, forgiveness and faith. Just because our spouse has committed sexual sin, that does not necessarily have to end the marriage if we have faith to trust God to bring healing and restoration.

III. What We Must Consider Concerning Marriage and Divorce

A. What happens when one is abandoned by a spouse who is a Christian?

This is certainly a challenge. The actual scenario is not addressed specifically in the bible. However, because this scenario does not fit within the two concessions mentioned above, my counsel to a spouse who has been abandoned by their Christian spouse is for them to wait. Give God time to restore their spouse’s heart. If they repent, they can begin to work again on the marriage. If they do not repent, inevitably the departed spouse will initiate a relationship with someone else down the road. When this occurs, that departed spouse is committing adultery which allows for the Christian spouse who has been abandoned to be freed from the marriage vow that the departed spouse has broken.

B. What are the expectations for those divorced prior to their salvation?

The bible is clear that, when we are saved, we become new creations. The old has passed away and all things are becoming new. There is nothing in Scripture that indicates that divorce (or any other pre-salvation sin) carries over into our new life with Christ. All of our sin is washed away in the blood of Jesus Christ. We are forgiven, justified and born anew. There is no true moral expectation on those who are still dead in their sins. When one is given spiritual life in Christ, their sin record is fully purged, and they begin a new life. Shame, guilt and fear over a failed marriage prior to salvation is unnecessary. That person is forgiven, free and called to begin to live a joyful, holy life as they learn to walk with Jesus by faith.

C. Is one who is remarried outside of the bounds of lawful divorce guilty of perpetual adultery?

The answer for Christians is that there is no perpetual guilt for any sin. When a person is divorced and remarried for any reason other than the two concessions written above, they commit a sin. The specific sins could be viewed as 1) breaking their marriage vows to God as a Christian and 2) committing adultery by remarrying someone outside of the biblical allowances for remarriage. When they are made aware of this sin by God's Word and God's Spirit, they should confess this as the sin that it is. I recommend that those who were remarried outside of the biblical allowances for remarriage should take time together with their new spouse, humble themselves before God, confess together that they now know they sinned by marrying each other, ask God to forgive their sin, and then devote the rest of their days together as a husband and wife unto the Lord. They repent, confess and sanctify the new marriage. Then, they should have no concerns or guilt about the possibility that they are living in a perpetual state of adultery. They can honor the lord as He makes right their marriage, even though the marriage originated in a sinful means of relationship.

D. The devastating effects on children of divorce.

- Children from broken homes are much more likely to have a difficult time obtaining and maintaining steady employment.
- The children of divorced parents are more likely to become "teen parents," producing out-of-wedlock babies, than the children of life-long married parents.
- The children of divorced parents are three times more likely to have emotional or behavioral problems than they will have if their biological parents stay together.
- The children of divorced parents are prone to more health, behavioral, and emotional problems that ultimately lead to drug abuse and even suicide.
- The academic performances of such children are poor. Statistics show that such children are more likely to drop out of school than children from one-time-married couples.
- Daughters of divorced parents find it more difficult to value their femininity or to believe that they are genuinely lovable.
- Sons of divorced parents frequently demonstrate less confidence in their ability to relate with women, either at work or romantically.
- Such children also demonstrate an earlier loss of virginity, more cohabitation, higher expectations of divorce, higher divorce rates later in life, and less desire to have children.

E. The personal and public attitudes of believers and local assemblies towards those who have been divorced.

While the stigma surrounding divorce and divorced people has lessened in our culture, the Church still struggles to know how to respond. Because the bible defines divorce as a sin, Christians know that they cannot simply dismiss it as something insignificant. In many places, divorced people are ostracized by churches. There is a loveless shame often communicated by pastors and preachers towards those in the flock whose marriages failed. For some reason, divorce is often treated as “the unpardonable sin” which presumably leaves divorced people in some undefined spiritual limbo. Then there is the inconsistent treatment of those in church leadership who have undergone a divorce prior to salvation. Are they disqualified from leadership due to a failed marriage prior to their conversion? What does the church do with leaders who are abandoned by their spouses, or whose spouses are unfaithful? As many as there are different churches in America, there seems to be an equal amount of biblical interpretations and standards set concerning the issue of divorce. My approach is to examine what Scripture says and then to apply those Scriptures in each scenario that I am asked to address. Divorce and remarriage are complex issues which should be approached with truth, love, humility and compassion. While we cannot treat this major issue in our culture with flippancy, we also must not treat divorce as some special category of sin/failure that the blood of Jesus connects to in a manner different from all other sins. The Church must be gracious. The Church must be truthful. The Church must always move towards the restoration of hearts and lives for the glory of Jesus in our generation.